

PRESS RELEASE



BC Gildehuys & Associates

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Upskill and backbone needed in urban development and spatial planning amidst continued challenges

Even though one year is brief in terms of urban development and planning, it is worth looking at the most persistent issues of 2021 to determine the course of action for town and regional planners in 2022 and beyond.

"Urban development and the impact of spatial planning decisions or interventions last for decades and even centuries," says Burgert Gildehuys, a consultant specialising in spatial planning, finances, infrastructure investment, and urban economies at BC Gildehuys & Associates. "The decline in the capacity of municipalities, national issues disrupting local development, trendy international issues detracting from local problems and outdated planning data are all issues which continue to cause challenges to South Africa."

2021 marked the continued decline in the capacity of municipalities in both financial and institutional terms. The Zondo Commission unfolded state capture, and we saw how cadre deployment reduced government capacity on all levels. The response at a local government level was the resurrection and recycling of the concept of "*back to basics*" to improve service delivery. However, structural issues entrenched by accelerated urbanisation increased poverty due to a decade of economic decline, the government's response to Covid-19, and conveniently ignoring well developed policies, did not help matters.

The government's solution was the promotion of Capital Expenditures Frameworks (CEFs) to coordinate capital expenditure and – in true South African tradition – to introduce yet another plan (the District One Plan) to add to the many layers of plans and create the illusion of development.

The most significant aspect may be an increased effort to centralise planning, leading to more duplication and fewer results. Creating capacity and scope for development through decentralisation and privatising are the big no-nos in government.

"One should expect that the capacity of municipalities, even those newly formed coalitions, will continue to deteriorate," warns Gildenhuys. "Civil society and community efforts towards self-reliance will continue to grow in the year ahead, not as an alternative to current systems but often as a means to survive."

2021 also highlighted how national issues overshadow and disrupts local planning, development and service delivery. For example, the local government elections were all but local and were driven and controlled by political parties at the national level.

In common among major political parties is that political decision-making and interventions are highly centralised. Therefore, national political issues drive local politics. Furthermore, there is no distinction between politics and administration. Consequently, it is impossible to continue uninterrupted service delivery in a system where politicians have executive roles and political parties deploy officials. The boundaries between party and state and politics and administration are unclear, undefined, and conveniently flexible to suit the politics of the moment.

"The problem is that South Africa remain in a continuous election mode," explains Gildenhuys. "National elections are followed two years later by local elections, followed by ANC leadership battles, followed by national elections, so the process is continuous. There is never an opportunity to have sufficient time to adjust and improve service delivery policies and strategies or take the tough decision required. One cannot expect this to change with a change in government because it is simply an entrenched system at all levels."

Within its challenging political environment and dwindling capacities, South Africa is always looking for something to make things seem better. The rising star of 2021 was smart cities, with the President announcing that the government will build a smart city in the Eastern Cape. Apart from the fact that one does not build a smart city but that smart cities are the manifestation of how one applies technology in the built environment, we are well-versed in (local) government's flavour-of-the-month approach. It started with civic centres in the 1970s, shopping malls in the 1980s, waterfront developments, billions spent on the dysfunctional bus rapid transport (BRT) system and special economic zones (SEZs) aerotopoli or airport cities.

"Climate change is growing in stature as a central issue, and one should expect, rightly or wrongly, that it will gain momentum in 2022," he says. "The emergence and decline of topics that often originate internationally or at the national level divert attention from local problems. These mega issues either provide a beacon of hope in desperate times or help create a crisis behind which people can rally or politicians can justify more interventions."

The fourth issue from 2021 from an urban planning and development perspective is the increased recognition of the need for better planning data. More open-source data became available in 2021, supported by improved technology, specifically artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. For example, we saw the release of building footprints for the whole of Africa showing all buildings larger than 2m x 2m or detailed population data at 100m by 100m grid. This trend will accelerate in 2022 and stand to benefit spatial planning development at a scale not possible previously.

The international adoption of technology in spatial planning is rapid and at scale. However, due to skill constraints, the adoption process in South Africa is slow, and there are many examples of key planning documents in local government that still quotes 2011 figures as the best available data. The highlight of 2022 will be the national census in February 2022 and the results expected later in the year. The opportunities in the evolving access to better data lie in the ability to plan and implement from a better knowledge base. However, the inability to adopt and adapt to technology will force many insufficiently skilled town and regional planning professionals into redundancy.

"Progress with planning, development and service delivery in 2022 will depend on our ability to focus and have realistic expectations about what can and cannot be done," says Gildenhuys. "Urban planning and service delivery will continue in a highly politicised environment with growing skill, institutional and financial constraints over the short term.

"Every stakeholder and practitioner's most significant contribution must be to stay focused and foster realistic expectations. We cannot continue to lower the bar for the sake of political expedience. What we need in 2022 is a professional town and regional planning core that can challenge and advise on policy and development based on skills, knowledge and experience grounded in fact and not opinions and assumptions.

"To make 2022 a milestone year, town and regional planners will have to upskill themselves, grow a backbone and stop parroting political courses," he concludes.

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